

Topic: I. Democracy

What the students do: Small groups determine the most important elements of democracy and create a graphic representation of those they think are thriving and those they think are challenges in our country.

[CA History-Social Science Standards](#): 11.1.1; 12.1.2, 12.1.5, 12.2.4

[CMS Promising Approaches](#): 1, 2

Thanks to: [Street Law, Inc.](#)

Road to Democracy

Overview

Democracy is a concept that is hard to define. Political philosophers and practitioners debate the parameters of democracy and its requirements. Those who study governments might not agree about all the components of an effective democracy, but there are some principles or signposts that have been determined to serve as a general guide. Some international organizations such as Freedom Forum use these indicators to assess the health of democracy in the world.

In this lesson, students will explore and determine the elements or principles that must be present in a country in order for democracy to thrive.

Objectives

- Identify and describe elements of democracy.
- Identify challenges to democracy.
- List some elements that are in place and some elements that require more vigilance in their own country.
- Explain the role of a citizen in supporting the health of a democracy.

Materials/Preparation

Poster board or chart paper and markers for groups of 3-4.

Handout: Signposts of Democracy —1 one per student

Procedure

I. Focuser (5-7 minutes)

- Explain to students that they may recall that the first democracy started in Greece and that it required that all the eligible men meet in the main square to vote on support for war initiatives and Athenian leaders. Not everyone who lived in Greece had a say in how they were governed, so the expression that democracy is “rule by the people” is sometimes not so easily defined. Today, some democracies have parliamentary systems, whereas others have presidential systems. Some democracies are more centralized and others delegate more power to states. Also, some countries are just on their way to democracy and others need to renew their commitment to democracy.
- Ask students to think about what they think a democracy needs to be healthy and strong. They should think of what elements they would have in place in an ideal democracy. What

are the essential components that are necessary? Ask students to take a moment to jot down their ideas on a piece of paper. Then, ask students to consider what are the obstacles to achieving democracy? What kinds of things would be present in a country that was showing signs of losing its commitment to democracy or that might prevent a country from being a model of democracy. Students should jot down those things that they think are obstacles to democracy.

- Ask students to give a few examples of what they answered to see if they are on track.

II. Working on Posters (20 minutes)

- Next, explain to students that they will work in groups to draw a Roadmap to Democracy for a fictitious country. Together, their team will brainstorm the elements of democracy and the barriers to democracy. Using this information, they will draw a road that leads to a perfect democracy and they can invent the name of that country. They should draw a road and along it they draw pictures of all the obstacles that come to mind, as well as all the things that allow their democracy to flourish.
- Clarify any questions that students might have. Tell them that they must choose someone from their group who will describe their roadmap to the rest of the class. (2 minutes each)
- Divide the class into groups of 4 – 5 (smaller if they have less experience working in groups). Distribute posters and markers to students.

Each group presents on the results of their group work. (15 minutes)

III. Analyzing the posters (10 minutes)

- Which elements are common to all the posters?
- Which elements seem to be the most crucial to democracy?
- Are there elements that are not defining of democracies, but can be found in other systems?
- Which elements seem to be working in our country today?
- Which elements are jeopardizing democracy in our country today?
- In what way can citizens have a role to play in supporting democracy? Are there ways that people undermine democracy?
- Describe something that you would hope citizens would do to support democracy in your country?

IV. Discussion and Reflection

Distribute **Handout: Signposts of Democracy**. Have students compare their Roads to Democracy with the Signposts of Democracy.

- Which principles that you included on your poster match those on the Signposts of Democracy? Which ones are missing?
- In what ways can “we the people” in a democracy strengthen the “Road to Democracy?” Why is it important for people to participate in a democracy?

Signposts of Democracy



Citizen Participation

One of the most basic signposts of a democracy is citizen participation in government. Participation is the key role of citizens in democracy. It is not only their right, but it is their duty. Citizen participation may take many forms including standing for election, voting in elections, becoming informed, debating issues, attending community or civic meetings, being members of private voluntary organizations, paying taxes, and even protesting. Participation builds a better democracy.



Equality

Democratic societies emphasize the principle that all people are equal. Equality means that all individuals are valued equally, have equal opportunities, and may not be discriminated against because of their race, religion, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation. In a democracy, individuals and groups still maintain their right to have different cultures, personalities, languages and beliefs.



Political Tolerance

Democratic societies are politically tolerant. This means that while the majority of the people rule in a democracy, the rights of the minority must be protected. People who are not in power must be allowed to organize and speak out. Minorities are sometimes referred to as "the opposition" because they may have ideas that are different from the majority. Individual citizens must also learn to be tolerant of each other.

A democratic society is often composed of people from different cultures, racial, religious and ethnic groups who have viewpoints different from a majority of the population. A democratic society is enriched by diversity. If the majority deny rights to and destroy their opposition, then they also destroy democracy.

One goal of democracy is to make the best possible decision for the society. To achieve this, respect for all people and their points of view is needed. Decisions are more likely to be accepted, even by those who oppose them, if all citizens have been allowed to discuss, debate and question them.



Accountability

In a democracy, elected and appointed officials have to be accountable to the people. They are responsible for their actions. Officials must make decisions and perform their duties according to the will and wishes of the people, not for themselves.



Transparency

For government to be accountable the people must be aware of what is happening in the country. This is referred to as transparency in government. A transparent government holds public meetings and allows citizens to attend. In a democracy, the press and the people are able to get information about what decisions are being made, by whom and why.



Regular Free & Fair Elections

One way citizens of the country express their will is by electing officials to represent them in government. Democracy insists that these elected officials are chosen and peacefully removed from office in a free and fair manner.

Intimidation, corruption and threats to citizens during or before an election are against the principles of democracy.

In a democracy, elections are held regularly every so many years. Participation in elections should not be based on a citizen's wealth. For free and fair elections to occur, most adult citizens should have the right to stand for government office. Additionally, obstacles should not exist which make it difficult for people to vote.



Economic Freedom

People in a democracy must have some form of economic freedom. This means that the government allows some private ownership of property and businesses, and that the people are allowed to choose their own work and join labor unions. The role the government should play in the economy is open to debate, but it is generally accepted that free markets should exist in a democracy and the state should not totally control the economy. Some argue that the state should play a stronger role in countries where great inequality of wealth exists due to past discrimination or other unfair practices.



Control of the Abuse of Power

Democratic societies try to prevent any elected official or group of people from misusing or abusing their power. One of the most common abuses of power is corruption. Corruption occurs when government officials use public funds for their own benefit or exercise power in an illegal manner.

Various methods have been used in different countries to protect against these abuses. Frequently the government is structured to limit the powers of the branches of government; to have independent courts and agencies with power to act against any illegal action by an elected official or branch of government; to allow for citizen participation and elections; and to check police abuse of power.



Accepting the Results of Elections

In democratic elections, there are winners and losers. Often the losers in an election believe so strongly that their party or candidate is the best one, that they refuse to accept the results of the election. The consequences of not accepting the results of an election may be a government that is ineffective and cannot make decisions. It may even result in violence. This is against democratic principles.



Human Rights

All democracies strive to respect and protect the human rights of citizens. Human rights mean those values that reflect respect for human life and human dignity. Democracy emphasizes the value of every human being. Examples of human rights include freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, the right to equality and the right to basic education.



Multi-Party Systems

In order to have a multi-party system, more than one political party must participate in elections and play a role in government. A multi-party system allows for opposition to the party that wins the election. This helps provide the government with different viewpoints on issues. Additionally, a multi-party system provides voters with a choice of candidates, parties and policies to vote for. Historically, when a country only has one party, the result has been a dictatorship.



The Rule of Law

In a democracy no one is above the law, not even a king or an elected President. This is called the rule of law. It means that everyone must obey the law and be held accountable if they violate it. Democracy also insists that the law be equally, fairly and consistently enforced. This is sometimes referred to as “due process of law.”



Bill of Rights

Many democratic countries also choose to have a bill of rights to protect the people against abuse of power. A bill of rights is a list of rights and freedoms guaranteed to all people in the country. When a bill of rights becomes part of a country's constitution, the courts have the power to enforce these rights. A bill of rights limits the power of government and may also impose duties on individuals and organizations.